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Grounded Theory

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Grounded theory is a broad perspective on how to conduct qualitative social science research. It comprises a distinctive methodology, a particular view of scientific method, and a set of procedures for analyzing data and constructing theories. The methodology provides a justification for undertaking qualitative research as a legitimate, indeed rigorous, form of inquiry. The conception of scientific method depicts research as a process of inductively generating theories from closely analyzed data. The specific procedures used in grounded theory comprise an array of coding and sampling procedures for data analysis, and a set of interpretative procedures that assist in the construction of theory that emerges from, and is grounded in, the data. In all of this, grounded theory researchers are expected to meet the canons of doing good scientific research, such as reproducibility and generalizability.

Grounded theory has been employed by researchers in a variety of disciplines, including sociology, nursing studies, education, management science, and psychology. It is probably the best known and widely used qualitative research methodology available today.

History

The grounded theory method was introduced in the 1960s by two American sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, and has been further developed by them and others. Grounded theory was introduced to serve three purposes. First, it endeavored to close the gap between theory and empirical research by having theory emerge from the data. Second, it began to spell out the inductive logic involved in producing grounded theory. Finally, it provided a justification for the careful and rigorous use of qualitative research methods in sociology.

Deriving its theoretical underpinnings from the philosophy of American pragmatism and the related social theory, symbolic interactionism, grounded theory portrays research as a problem-solving endeavor concerned with understanding action from the perspective of the human agent. Strauss was heavily influenced by the University of Chicago tradition in qualitative social research, with its emphasis on the method of comparative analysis and the use of participant observation. Glaser was strongly influenced by the

quantitative research tradition at Columbia University, and he brought to grounded theory important ideas from this tradition and translated them into qualitative terms.

Both Glaser and Strauss continued to develop the methodology of grounded theory, although in separate publications. From the 1980s onwards, their formulations of grounded theory diverged somewhat. Glaser sees himself as having remained true to the original conception of grounded theory, with its emphasis on studying basic social processes, the use of the constant comparison method, and the formulation of theories by letting abstract relationships between theoretical categories emerge from the data. Strauss, in association with Juliet Corbin, developed new methods of analysis in place of the strategy of constant comparative analysis, and they stressed the importance of verification of theory as well as its generation. Glaser has strongly objected that Strauss and Corbin's approach forces data and their analysis into preconceived categories instead of letting the categories emerge from the data. Although Strauss acknowledges that there are differences, he maintains that both he and Glaser advocate use of the same basic procedures for doing grounded theory research.

Philosophical Perspectives

Grounded theory has also been presented from a number of different philosophical positions. Glaser adopts a general empiricist outlook on inquiry. This has sometimes been described by commentators as “positivism.” However, given the influence of pragmatism on his early formulations of grounded theory, this is an unfair characterization. Strauss's own characterization of grounded theory leans toward a social constructionist perspective. Kathy Charmaz has provided an explicitly constructivist depiction of grounded theory that breaks with the objectivism of Glaserian grounded theory. On a constructionist perspective, social reality is not revealed so much as socially constructed in the course of inquiry. David**[p. 419 ↓]** Rennie offers a hermeneutic interpretation of the grounded theory method that is able to provide an understanding of the meaning of text and reconcile the tensions that exist between realism and relativism in orthodox accounts of the method. Finally, Brian Haig offers a reconstruction of grounded theory methodology from a broadly scientific realist perspective. On this interpretation, grounded theory method involves the inductive

discovery of empirical phenomena followed by the abductive construction of theory to explain the phenomena.

Procedures

The variety of interpretations of grounded theory extend to characterizations of the method itself. In efforts to identify empirical social phenomena, and construct theories that explain those phenomena, almost all accounts of grounded theory adopt the three major research strategies of data coding, memo writing, and theoretical sampling. In grounded theory, data gathering and data analysis are interactive: From the time data collection begins, grounded theorists engage in data analysis, which leads to further data collection, subsequent data analysis, and so on.

The first data-analytic phase of grounded theory begins with the coding of data. This is undertaken to conceptualize the data by discovering categories into which they fit. The coding process has three phases: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In open coding, researchers describe the data by looking at them line by line. This strategy of focusing on small units of data, and their interpretation, encourages the development of a theoretical sensitivity to new ideas about the data and helps prevent the forcing of data into existing categories. Strauss and Corbin maintain that when a full array of categories has been identified, one should undertake axial coding, whereby one puts the data back together again in new ways by making connections between the numerous categories. After that, a selective coding step is implemented in which the researcher looks to systematically identify those categories that relate closely to the core category. The core category lies at the heart of the emerging theory and is central to the theory's integration.

Although memo writing can occur at any stage of the research process, it frequently takes place between the coding of data and the writing of the initial draft of the research report. Memos are written to identify, develop, and keep track of theoretical ideas. Where relevant, they are recorded, recalled, and reworked to produce new theoretical memos. Memo writing becomes more systematic, focused, and intense as theory of greater density and coherence is produced.

Memos written about data codes and theoretical ideas enable the researcher to identify gaps that require the collection of further data. For this, theoretical sampling is undertaken. With theoretical sampling, in contrast with traditional representative sampling, decisions about which data to collect, code, analyze, and interpret are directed by the emerging grounded theory. Theoretically relevant events, activities, and populations are all sampled, and the comparisons between these are aimed at increasing the conceptual density and integration of the emerging theory. Thinking effectively about data in theoretical terms requires an adequate degree of theoretical sensitivity. When the additional gathering and analysis of data no longer contribute to the understanding of a concept or category, a point of theoretical saturation is reached. At this point, one stops collecting data in respect of a category and moves to consider another category or concept.

Grounded theory considers writing to be an important part of the research process. This extends beyond the writing of memos to writing up the research report itself. One of the major goals in drafting the research report is to present a fully integrated account of the phenomena studied. This will involve highlighting areas that are insufficiently integrated and working to remedy these through multiple drafts if needs be. Grounded theory provides a number of rules of thumb, or heuristics, to improve the integrative value of the research report.

Criticisms

Despite its popularity, grounded theory has been subjected to a number of criticisms. One criticism asserts that grounded theory is a regression to a simple “Baconian” form of inductive science. In this**[p. 420 ↓]** interpretation, grounded theory is depicted as a tabula rasa view of inquiry, which maintains that data analysis and interpretation are not dependent on concepts or theories. However, this is an unwarranted criticism. In their first book on grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss explicitly stated that the researcher must have a perspective in order to discern relevant data and abstract relevant categories from them. In their view, the researcher seeks to obtain emergent diverse categories at different levels of abstraction by bracketing potentially relevant existing facts and theories for some time.

A further criticism of grounded theory is the claim that the reasoning involved in the generation of grounded theory is not inductive, as Glaser and Strauss claim, but abductive. Inductive reasoning is typically a generalizing inference, and it is difficult to see how such descriptive inferences could lead to the causes that explain generalizations. In contrast, abductive inference is explanatory inference, often from presumed effects to underlying causes. It is this type of reasoning process that leads from facts to explanatory theories. It is surprising that the originators of grounded theory have not appealed to abductive reasoning, given its prominence in the work of the pragmatist tradition from which they have drawn.

Yet another criticism of grounded theory points out that its methodology stresses the importance of theory generation at the expense of theory verification, or validation. However, whereas the first writings on grounded theory method deemphasized theory validation in favor of theory generation, this was in part due to Glaser and Strauss's desire to break from the hypothetico-deductive emphasis on theory testing that dominated 20th-century sociology. Glaser has continued to see grounded theory primarily as a theory generation method, but Strauss has come to emphasize the importance of theory verification in grounded theory research.

Although grounded theory does not articulate a precise account of the nature of theory testing, some writings on the method make it clear that there is more to theory appraisal than testing for empirical adequacy. Clarity, consistency, parsimony, density, scope, integration, fit to data, explanatory power, predictiveness, heuristic worth, and application are all mentioned by Glaser and Strauss as relevant evaluative criteria, although they do not elaborate on these, nor do they work them into an integrated view of theory appraisal.

Conclusion

Grounded theory methodology continues to be the subject of critical epistemological examination. Its methods continue to be employed widely, both in full and in part, in social science research, especially with the aid of computer programs for qualitative data analysis. Although initially developed as an approach to qualitative research, the use of grounded theory method in the future is likely to employ a mix of qualitative and

quantitative research methods and to link with other methods that give explicit emphasis to the construction of theory that is undertaken to explain the data patterns obtained about empirical social phenomena.

Applying Ideas on Statistics and Measurement

The following abstract is adapted from Rennie, D. L. (2000). Grounded theory methodology as methodical hermeneutics: Reconciling realism and relativism. *Theory and Psychology, 10*(4), 481–502.

David Rennie argues that the realism-relativism duality addressed by the grounded theory approach to qualitative research is best accounted for when the method is understood to be an inductive approach to hermeneutics. Phenomenology, C. S. Peirce's theory of inference, philosophical hermeneutics, pragmatism, and the new rhetoric are drawn upon in support of this argument. It is also held that this formulation of the **grounded theory** method opens the possibility that the method improves on earlierapproaches to methodical hermeneutics. As an outcome of this formulation, the debate on the validity and reliability of returns from the grounded theory approach is cast in a new light. The new methodical hermeneutics is discussed in terms of prior attempts to relate hermeneutics to method.

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See also

Further Reading

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